A New Islander Profile

by G. E. Mortimore

ONE MAN INDUSTRY

ERNEST Brown, the one-man lumber industry, is taking a well-deserved rest.

For more than 40 years he has lived on Nigei Island in Queen Charlotte Strait, off Vancouver Island's northeast tip. During much of that time he has been the only inhabitant of the island, running a sawmill by himself.

Recently he blacked out and collapsed, and found himself virtually unable to move—stricken by a mysterious illness. A friend put into his harbor on a chance visit, and found him there.

The result was a call to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who sent their brand-new patrol vessel up from Port Hardy and ran Mr. Brown to hospital in Alert Bay.

The 70-year-old Yorkshireman still doesn't know exactly what ailed him. All he knows is that they sounded his chest, made him swallow (under protest) the first pill he had ever taken in his life, and kept him in for a while.

Now he is in Victoria, staying with his brother and haggling with federal authorities about his old-age pension. He and the Canadian government are deadlocked over proof of age. Mr. Brown is awaiting a copy of his birth certificate and army record, from England.

He came out to Canada from his native Leeds to join his father, a Yorkshire woodcarver who had emigrated.

"I was the correct age for all men coming to Canada—16," he says. "At 15, he can't travel, he's too young . . . but when he's 16 or past 16 the whole world can talk to him and he will not listen . . . he knows it all.

"I knew everything. I was even telling the captain of the ship that brought me over, which side of that island to go . . . and I was right. The first time I ever saw it in my life. The Strait of Belle Isle."

READ "COLONIST"

He learned a lot about Vancouver Island by reading The Daily Colonist in Leeds.

"I got a good idea of the geography. When I was still in Leeds, still a kid, I was talking with an old seafaring man, and he said 'I've been out there lad. That's a fine country, bah gum lad, thee's going to the right place.'

"I started work within three days after I landed here. I've never been out of a job since."

He had never done carpentry before, but he landed a job helping build houses. He quit after about 18 months because he was expected to paint outdoors in freezing weather.

"I went down the Esquimalt Road, right close to my own house, that's the same house as I'm living in now, with my brother, and I seen the boss down there. He said I haven't got much just now but I can give you a job. He said you go up the hill to such and such a place, Victoria West, and you'll find George is there working, George Winthrop.

"That was far back, far, far away; 1905. And I was right past the house the other day. I looked at it—exactly the same as when I took my tools off that day.

"My father was a woodcarver. He carved these here corner posts upon the first wooden hearses in this town. Hearses that's pulled by horses . . . and when they went to motor hearses he got the very first orders—he did it in his own shop back there where we live now . . ."

Mr. Brown, senior, decided to take up a homestead on Nigei Island, and open a sawmill.

Ernest Brown and his brother built a 30-foot steamboat in Victoria and chugged up to Nigei Island with it.

The family had nearly three-quarter sections of land, much of it heavily timbered. They lived on the boat while they cleared a piece of land and built a cabin, 12 by 14 feet. Then they built their mill.

For two years, the Browns worked spring, summer and part of the autumn on Nigei Island, returned to Victoria and worked on construction in the winters. (Negei Island, pronounced "Negay," is an approximation of the name of a famous Indian chief of the region, Negatsi; and Cascade Harbor, the island port where Mr. Brown keeps his boat, is named after a small wooden steamer that used to run in those waters).

Ernest Brown points with his pipe to his home on Nigei Island.

In the third year Mr. Brown, senior, left the firm and came down to live in Victoria. The two sons carried on.

At that time, great hopes were held for the north end of Vancouver Island. Some 400 people settled north of Port Hardy. The Brown sawmill supplied lumber to build their houses.

But the dream of development never came true.

Some disconnected pieces of road were built, but they didn't lead anywhere. For the most part, the region was cut off from markets.

The hard-working, ambitious settlers began to lose heart. Some of them left.

"The war broke out. From 1914 on the settlers began to depart. By the end of 1914 we'd got rid of a dozen, and then by 1915 we sure started to get rid of them.

"Every week there would be a couple. 'So and so's gone,' that was announced to the public by Mr. Skinner, who was the postmaster at Shushartie Bay. 'So and so's gone—they've gone to try and get a free ride to England. He was always talking about that 'free ride to England.'

"Or he'd say, 'He's gone, but he doesn't expect to be there before the war is over.' Everybody was going to go, but they weren't going to get there in time for no war.

"And then 1915 rolled by and it got to be 1916. I was all right. I was cutting all the wood I could. I was getting rid of everything. My brother was working with me. We were slugging along, doing what we could, and it got to the end of 1916, and by that time I was beginning to have my troubles, and I decided that maybe I had better go to war too.

"So I get in communication by mail. I was going to be the first mail order soldier from the district. I communicated by mail to this forestry corps in Vancouver and I got a reply asking me to report at once to Vancouver."

He walked straight off the Union boat and into the army. Before long he was in France.

Few of the settlers returned after the war. A number just walked out of their cabins and houses, leaving the places derelict—sometimes merely removing the doors so that wild animals couldn't be trapped inside.

There was little demand for lumber to build houses. So Ernest Brown built boats—sturdy boom boats for the logging camps, boats which could also serve for fishing when they were needed.

At one time he was carrying out the whole operation, from raw material to finished product. He felled the trees by hand, floated them to his sawmill, sawed them into lumber and made the lumber into boats.

In more recent years he has been sawing other people's logs on a share basis, taking some of the lumber as his fee for sawing it. He can saw logs as large as 32 feet long and 36 inches in diameter, single-handed.

His brother went down to visit Victoria, got married, and lost a hand in an accident in the factory where he worked. A man with such an injury would have a hard time living in such a lonely place as Nigei Island. So he remained in Victoria, and still lives here.

HE'LL GO BACK

However, Mr. Brown is not always alone. There are logging camps on the island for part of the year. Fishermen begin to anchor in Cascade Bay in the spring.

He has to stock up winter groceries several months ahead, because there is no store nearby. But in the summer there are two fish camps with stores at Bull Harbor, eight and a half miles away.

At one time he used to row to Bull Harbor and back, pausing just long enough to buy the groceries he needed. Recently, however, he has been using an outboard motor.

He had been away from the island only a short time when word came to him that half his outboard motor had been stolen. One of the disadvantages about life in those parts is the danger of theft. As soon as a man's back is turned, someone is likely to loot his house.

Mr. Brown has no electric lights, no telephone—just coal oil lamps and a battery radio. He has dammed a stream to make his own small lake. He grows a garden and shoots deer.

If the atomic bomb wiped out the rest of B.C., he could probably carry on a Robinson Crusoe existence for some time.

He has hired men at times, but he says that most of them have turned out to be work-shy. He gets more done by himself.

There are no roads on his island, and he does not drive a car. He looks with amusement at the fleet of cars in such island settlements as Alert Bay and Sointula, all shuttling back and forth on a few miles of road.

"Young fellows nowadays, they won't go anywhere unless there's a first-class road, that you can drive 60 miles an hour on," he says.

One day soon, 70-year-old Ernest Brown expects to be on his way back to his lonely outpost. He has orders for two boats that he wants to fill—providing his machinery is still there when he gets back.